

SUGGESTIONS FOR COLLECTING FOLKLORE

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By J. A. Rickard

With a Foreword by Charles S. Pendleton

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Price Twenty-five Cents

FOREWORD

This leaflet is the first publication of the Tennessee Folklore Society. Other publications will appear from time to time, as more people become interested in the work and supply the necessary funds to pay the cost of printing.

All citizens of Tennessee and other persons or institutions interested in folklore are invited to become members of the organization. The dues will be kept low and the membership will receive without further charge all the ordinary publications issued.

The Society has a serious and worthy purpose. It will endeavor to make an accurate and dependable record of the "natural antiquities" of our state—the bits of unusual speech, of customs and usages, and of songs, dances and games which are still preserved in Tennessee (and many of them in other states), but which are now being forgotten under changes in education, in frequency of travel, and in manner of living. No material will be dealt with whatever to the detriment of Tennessee, and no material will be released for unworthy exploitation.

Members of the Society in particular and of the public in general are invited to submit material. We shall try to preserve at least in mimeograph form the folklore which is collected. Later, as our funds increase, we hope to have all of it printed and well bound.

The purpose of the present leaflet is obvious—to make people better acquainted with the nature of folklore and to aid in its collection and preservation. All the examples given are taken from our files of material which has already been collected for the Tennessee Folklore Society. These files, which we hope will grow greatly, are open to members of the Society and to others interested, for purposes of serious study. The outline contained in this leaflet is admittedly incomplete; indeed, no outline that we have examined does contain all the different phases of folklore, so vast is the subject and so broad the field. Our outline will be suggestive, however, and should guide our members and friends at least in their first steps of collecting Tennessee materials.

When you do collect (and please do), remember that accuracy is the first essential. Do not embellish, do not change even a slight bit, what you heard and are recording. Do not fail to write down accurately, the name and address of the person

who is your source, maybe both your immediate source and also his ultimate source. If you can add valuable descriptive or characterizing information about him, do so. And, in cases that permit it, state how frequently, in your territory, you have found this, or closely similar, material.

Please send your collections, or copies of them, to Professor J. A. Rickard, Secretary, Tennessee Folklore Society, Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, Cookeville, Tennessee.

Charles S. Pendleton, President
Tennessee Folklore Society

Nashville, Tennessee
February 23, 1935

HOW TO COLLECT FOLKLORE

Sources of information: folklore is to be secured from people, not from books. The song that has already appeared in some song collection may be a folk song, but it is much less important to us because it has been published. The folklorist should seek the unrecorded, unpublished part of the daily lives of people. Older folks generally know much lore, and almost all those living in rural sections, whether young or old, come in contact with it daily. All ages and classes of people, however, from the school child to the grandfather, and from all places and occupations, usually can contribute something to a folklore collection.

Writing the information: in committing to writing the information secured, one should observe certain standard forms. For the superstitious sayings and other shorter items, a card 4" x 6" is best. For the stories and other longer items the regular sized 8½" x 11" paper should be used. In the case of stories, great care should be taken to get all the details. It would be well if the writer could hear the story from several different people, and he might clarify some tales (buried treasure stories, for instance) by using a simple map. If possible, the melody (but not the harmony) as well as the words should be secured for songs. A simple form of music paper can be made with a typewriter or a ruler. In all cases, exact information should be given as to names, dates, places, and other pertinent items, and the source should be traced as far back as possible. To facilitate filing, place only one item on each card. Here is the correct form:

John Smith
Nashville, Tennessee

DECEMBER 3, 1934

SUPERSTITIONS AND BELIEFS

Bad Luck Omen

If the ashes are removed from a fire place that burns wood between new Christmas and old Christmas, the one who removes them will have bad luck that year.

Source: Obadiah Smith (grandfather), Nashville, Tennessee, who says he heard it when a boy from his father, Sam Smith, in Charleston, South Carolina, about 1845.

FOLKLORE OUTLINE WITH EXPLANATIONS

Folklore consists of:

1. Folk speech and sayings

a. Peculiar language expressions

These may be words, phrases, or whole sentences. They are not necessarily slang; they may be provincialisms, or entirely correct English. The Anglo-Saxon heritage of Tennessee people is responsible for many of them, but others are traceable to other origins. A few illustrations are given here: kindling wood originally was called "hist wood" or "hurry wood", and is still referred to by that term in some sections. A "clutch of eggs" is a setting of eggs gathered up by a woman in her apron, which she "clutches" with one hand. "Johnny cake" was originally "journey cake", and was made of plain bread, spread or rolled in bark and baked on the open fire while on a journey. The man who sits up late or arises early is said to be "swapping daylight for darkness". One who is convalescing from sickness is "not bed fast, but house bound". A person using language hard to understand is "beyond the reach of my 'simmon pole."

b. Popular sayings

These range all the way from rank superstitions to sayings worthy of a philosopher. Examples are: pretty is as pretty does; every tub sits on its own bottom; a barking dog never bites; the still sow drinks the slop; never cut off your nose to spite your face; Harvest time is the terror of loafers; where spider webs grow, no beaux go; a whistling woman and a crowing hen always come to some bad end.

c. Nicknames, place names and legends

Nicknames frequently denote some physical or other personal peculiarity of the person or animal named. Quite a bit of local history can be learned from tracing the origin of place names, such as Calfkiller Creek, Lewis County, Whistling Island, Paint Rock, and Thunder Mountain. Around some of the places legends have grown up which would make interesting stories if told properly.

d. Riddles and jingles

Most of these are primarily for children, but they may interest grown-ups too. Omitting the Humpty-Dumpty type of riddle and the Mother Goose rhyme, there are still many lesser known riddles and jingles that need to be published. Here is a riddle that will serve as an illustration:

A king met a king in a narrow lane,
The king asked the king what might be his name;
"Gold is my fiddle and silver is my bow,
I have told you my name three times in a row
And yet you don't know".

Answer: My is the king's name.

Here is another that might be included also under the heading of superstitions about lovers and marriages:

Marry in black, you'll wish yourself back;
Marry in blue, you'll always be true;
Marry in red, you'll wish yourself dead;

Marry in green, you'll be ashamed to be seen;
 Marry in brown, you'll live out of town;
 Marry in white, you've chosen all right.

Sometimes jingles are used in the cure of diseases, as is true of the person who ties three knots in a string, in a secret place, repeating:

Fever and ague here I tie you,
 Fever and ague here I deny you,
 Fever and ague here I defy you.

e. Native wit and humor

Some examples of this group are long enough to be called stories; others are much shorter. Some can be traced to a certain person; others cannot. Unless one can be pretty sure that it has not appeared in print, one cannot afford to credit such an example to native folks. Here is an illustrative story, though, that may be genuine: a circuit rider who was visiting a mountain home, told the story of the death of Jesus, as though the family had never heard of it. The woman turned to her "old man" and said: "Thar now, Jim, I told you we'd orter take a paper. Here somebody's gone and died and we didn't even know he was sick." Another mountain woman had this to say about her prevaricating, shiftless husband: "Jim ain't no Bible, if his mouth does open and shut."

2. Superstitions and beliefs

a. Witchcraft

A few examples of witchcraft trials might be secured from early court records. A belief in witchcraft still persists in some sections, where certain persons are regarded as witches. Many instances may be found of people or animals that have been bewitched, and other cases have been cited where successful cures have been made of those who were bewitched. Some even know what to do to become a witch. A few witchcraft tales exist.

b. The influence of the moon and stars

The moon is supposed to have a great effect upon crops, while the stars are believed to wield an influence upon human beings in general. For instance, one should plant all seeds, make soap, and kill hogs on the increase of the moon. If these are done on the decrease the seeds will not grow, the soap will not lather, and the meat will not shrink. Again, certain stars are supposed to be lucky ones for persons born at the time when their influence is felt.

c. Animal superstitions

These include a wide variety of beliefs regarding animals and the weather, rhymes addressed to animals, popular names for animals, good and bad luck omens that include animals, and other items. For example: if a rooster crows in the door, someone is coming; cut off a dog's "dew claws" and he will not die from a poisonous snake's bite; if you hear a dove while walking down hill you will lose weight; if you give away a pig you will have bad luck raising hogs.

Children often address incantations to "doodle bugs". To see a cat washing its face is a sign of rain. Furthermore, the "ground hog" is supposed to be an accurate weather prophet under certain conditions.

d. Tree and plant superstitions

These are among our oldest beliefs and include the mistletoe and holly superstitions. Other ideas not so well known are: when re-setting trees name them so they will live; if two people walk on opposite sides of a tree and do not say "venture" they will quarrel; and if you thank a person for plants to reset they will not live. Some plants have popular names, such as crow poison and snap dragons.

e. Good and bad luck omens

This group is one of the most numerous of the superstitions and beliefs, and permeates every phase of life. A few examples are: two people should not sweep the floor at the same time; it is bad luck to bring a hoe in the house; to find a pin with the point turned toward one is good luck; if a job of work is begun on Friday it will never be completed; to break a mirror means seven years of bad luck.

f. Magic and divination

Some of these items may be related to witchcraft or other superstitions and beliefs already mentioned, but others are not. For instance, it is commonly believed that one person in each family can take a V shaped peach tree fork and locate a place where a well can be dug to advantage. Again, some people, by repeating a certain verse in the Book of Ezekial, can stop bleeding. The fortune teller is a well-known figure in some places; it would be interesting to record how he does his work. Dreams are believed to aid in foretelling the future. Wishes, if made under proper conditions, are supposed to come true.

g. Folk remedies

The list of folk remedies is long, and emphasizes certain diseases such as colds, thrash, warts, chicken pox, ear ache, and pain in the side. For example, it is believed that to cure a pain in the side one has only to pick up a stone, spit on the under side, put it back in its place, and move on. Pick a wart till it bleeds, let three drops fall on a white grain of corn and feed to a black hen. To cure thrash, let the baby's father blow in its mouth three mornings in succession before he speaks to anyone.

h. Signs of the Zodiac

Almanacs, with their twelve signs of the Zodiac, have exercised a potent influence upon the lives of people, especially in the planting of crops. It is thought that if beans are planted when the sign is in the feet they will produce well. Cabbage should be planted when the sign is in the head. Cucumbers should be planted when the sign is in the arms or legs.

i. Beliefs about human life

It is only natural that a considerable body of superstitions should grow up around such important topics as lovers, marriages, births, deaths, and babies. It is believed, for instance, that if on May Day at sunrise a person will look into an open well he will see the reflection of his prospective mate for life. If a boy and girl place two leaves of mistletoe on a hot stove and they jump toward each other the couple will marry. Where hollyhocks blow, old maids grow. If a bird flies into the house, some one in the family will die soon. Tickling a baby will cause him to stutter.

j. The weather

The moon is supposed to exert a potent influence over the weather, but there are other factors; for instance: when a wood fire pops there will be snow soon; when wasps seek a shelter on a bright warm day in the fall the weather will soon change; the direction from which the clouds travel on Old Christmas day will indicate the direction from which rain comes that year. Again, if the clouds at sunset are red there will be fair weather; if dark, foul weather.

3. Traditional customs.

a. Local customs

Hog calling and chicken calling contests would come under this classification. At the conclusion of a community molasses making it is quite common for old and young to gather and celebrate. Grain threshing is often made an occasion of social importance as well as of work. Fox hunting and 'possum hunting are important occasions also. Around particular days such as Christmas, Hallowe'en and St. Valentine, numerous practices have grown up. Still other customs pertain to table manners, dress, religion, or social gatherings not mentioned above. A written description of these, with plenty of details, would be valuable.

b. Games

The games that children play at home or school, that the young folks play at their gatherings, or that the older people play when they visit, should be described and preserved. Among the children's contests are ring games like "Dropping the Handkerchief"; counting-out games, such as "William Trimbletoe"; and action and gesture games like "Going to California". For the younger people are such games as "Cross Questions and Crooked Answers". For the older folks there are various games, some of them sedentary, such as "Fox and Geese".

4. Songs and dances

a. Hero songs

These are narrative in content, for they tell of the deeds of some local person. They are similar to the hero tales, except that they are in the form of poetry and are set to music. Examples are: Casey Jones, John Henry, The Braswell Boys, and Michael King.

b. Spirituals

Much work has been done already in the collection of negro spirituals, such songs as Swing Low Sweet Chariot being well-known. Some of the white spirituals of the South have been gathered also, but much remains to be done in this field. Quite a few native songs are curious mixtures; they may have a number of verses on a theme in no way connected with religion, but the refrain will show the camp meeting influence. Examples are: The Old Sow's Tail, and Married Man's Lament.

c. Prison songs

John A. Lomax says that a large number of the ballads in his recent book of folk songs of America came from prisoners. People in prison sing, especially about themselves. These songs find their way outside of prison walls and in time become folk songs. Examples are: Ninety Nine, Prisoner at the Bar, and The Boston Burglar.

d. Play party songs and games

Some call them singing games, for they are usually played to the accompaniment of songs, rather than of instruments. Many of these games can be traced to England; others are more strictly American in development. They are still used by the young people at their parties in many rural sections of the country. Examples are: Old Betty Lina, The Miller Boy, Skip to My Lou, Going Down the River, and Candy Girl.

e. Square dance calls and figures

These are generally danced to the accompaniment of a violin or other instruments, playing Sally Good'n, Arkansaw Traveler, or tunes with a similar rhythm, and of a caller who cries out the figures. Four or more couples take part in a "set". There are various figures, more or less complicated, such as The Figure Eight, Bird in the Cage, Blue Beads, Four Hands Across, and Grapevine Twist.

f. Songs primarily for children

The mother often sang to the smaller children as she rocked them to sleep, or to the larger ones as they sat around the fire. Teacher and children also sang at school or at play. These songs frequently have a "tra la la" or similar arrangement in the refrain, and are generally on subjects that interest the child. Recently the author came across one that was thus arranged throughout. It ran like this:

Had a l
Had a little sweetheart just so high,
Tra la la sic a li de o.
I loved him better than chicken pie,
Tra la la sic a li de o.

Other examples are: Old Jack Frost, and The Birdies' Ball.

g. Songs having the flavor of certain occupations

Perhaps the most popular of these are the cowboy ballads, but there are songs of the frontiersman, the sailor, the lumberjack, the hunter, and other groups. Illustrative of these are such ballads as Home on the Range, Life on the Ocean Wave, and My Old Beaver Cap.

h. Songs of sentiment, the home, school, or fireside

Love songs figure prominently in this group, but others dealing with the home or school may be found also. Some may be traced to the soldier; others, to the negro; still others, to colonial days. Examples of this group are Budded Roses, The Old Stepstone, The School House on the Hill, and Oh, Brother Green.

5. Traditional narratives

a. Nursery tales

Bed-time, sandman, fairy and goblin stories are familiar examples, but animal tales like the Brer Rabbit, Fox and Bear stories--any story for children, in fact--might also be included. Examples are: "How the Pumpkin Grew to the Moon", and "The Boy Who Planted the Pumpkin Seeds".

b. Hero tales

These portray the real or imaginary deeds of some local bad man, strong man, soldier, pioneer, or other character. The Champ Ferguson, John Holly, Michael King or Joe Copeland stories are familiar examples.

c. Ghost stories

Some of these are gruesome in details and are connected with local crimes. They range all the way from the tragic to the ridiculous. Some of the "ghosts" finally become material objects; others are never explained. They feature such items as headless horsemen, haunted houses, and white objects seen at night. Typical of these is one about a preacher who saw a ghost "as big as a weaver's beam", and was turned out of the church for telling the story; or another about a bushwhacker who lost his life in the Civil War, and whose spirit still lingers around the scene of his murder.

d. Buried treasure stories and other local legends

Many of these begin with a tale of robbery or an Indian raid. Frequently maps are to be found that purport to give the location of the treasure, which is generally in a cave or at some place that cannot be located definitely. In most instances the treasure is yet to be found. Quite a few legends have grown up in connection with certain localities. As an example of the treasure year, there is supposed to be a fabulous fortune hid in a cave in the Buffalo Valley community. People are still looking also, for some loot of an Indian raid, which is hidden near Sevierville.

e. "Tall" tales

A "tall" tale is one that is not meant to be true. It may be a fishing or hunting yarn, a story of super-human deeds, or a tale of farming on the hillsides, or it may have any one of a number of other themes. While it may be found sometimes under items a, b, c, or d, above, it generally has a flavor and a wild exaggeration all its own. There is the example of the hunter who shot a bear with peach seeds and later found a peach tree growing from its side, or of the hillside farmer who had a mule with legs on one side longer than on the other for purposes of plowing.

f. Stories of pioneer, war, or Reconstruction days

In general, such stories have a foundation of fact, but frequently they have been embellished as they have passed from mouth to mouth. Tennessee is rich in such tales, and from some of them much local history is to be learned. Examples are: A Stage Coach Hold-up in 1875, The Murder of a Bushwhacker in 1863, and The Escape of a Confederate Soldier from the Yankees.

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